CULVER ACADEMY

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

I am absolutely delighted to be here this morning to share in this important academy. In order to prepare myself I have diligently read everything Culver sent me; catalogues, brochures, mission statements, and a wonderful pictorial history. *Pass In Review*, with photographs of important occasions. Several of the best friends I have, or anyone could ever hope to have are products of Culver and a little of their enthusiasm and devotion to and love for this place has rubbed off on me. So I am very glad to be here.

I also have a sneaking suspicion that all of you are not here this morning voluntarily: that the presence of the summer program students, all lined up and dressed up — was not something you all got together and decided to do — for me — or for your parents. I just don't want you to hold it against me. It wasn't my idea. As a matter of fact, we're in something of the same boat — you and I are. One of these dear Culver friends I mentioned, Mr. Paul Gignilliat, has a long family history here and a personal love and commitment to Culver. Mr. and Mrs. Gignilliat are also important leaders of the church that pays my salary back in Chicago. So when Paul and Ellen invite me to come

to Culver and drop what I'm doing and do what I'm told.

So since neither you nor I hare here voluntarily — (although I do mean it — I'm absolutely delighted to be here) — let's strike a deal. Let's make the best of it. I'll try my best to not go on too long and stay on track and bring us home in _____ minutes — if you'll just hang in there with me.

And what I propose to do is think a little bit about this particular moment in time — how unique it is; how maybe nobody has ever had to face what you and I face; or — how maybe there are others who have been here and maybe we can learn a little from them.

In any event, who would have thought at this time last year that the world, our nation, our lives would be turned upside down by the events that happened on September 11. Who would have thought that we'd be reading the newspaper every morning to see if somewhere in the world terror had struck again? Just last Wednesday a propane tank exploded at Chicago's Water treatment plant. It was no big deal — but within minutes the sky was full of Coast Guard and Police helicopters and the water full of police boats. Who would have thought that on this gorgeous summer Sunday morning, we'd have to be thinking about how to live with that threat: how to live with fear?

And so, I propose that the virtue we perhaps most need at this moment is an old one, a traditional one, and a good one — its name is courage. From the start let's also understand that courage does not mean the absence of fear. As a matter of fact, it is quite the opposite. Courage doesn't even show up until you're a little scared. You might even say that courage is the ability to keep moving ahead precisely when we're scared to death and not at all sure where we're going.

Let me tell you a little story about courage. It's from a book with courage in the title — *Undaunted Courage* — by Stephen Ambrose, it's about the Lewis and Clark expedition. They're on the cover of lat week's *Time* magazine by

the way because this January is the 200th anniversary of the start of the project. In any event, President Thomas Jefferson had just made a huge real estate deal called the Louisiana Purchase and in that no one had ever mapped it and analyzed it — in fact no one had ever seen it — no European Americans, except a few trappers. There were plenty of people living there. They knew a lot about it and love it a lot. It was their home. But that is another story. This one is about Lewis and Clark — who accepted Thomas Jefferson's assignment to travel from Washington — they actually began at Pittsburgh and then St. Louis — and with a small band of men, travel by boat and horseback and foot all the way to the

West Coast and then come back and tell the President what they saw.

Well, they saw a lot, including animals no one had ever seen before, including huge grizzly bears — who had never seen human beings with white skin before and didn't particularly like what they saw and lots of different Native — Native Americans — who didn't know what to make of them, and mostly helped them find their way, and one amazing Native American woman Sacagawea – without whose help, everybody agrees, the men would never have made it.

My favorite incident in the story happens on the night of April 7, 1805. Merewether Lewis was doing what he

did before he fell asleep — writing in his journal. He was in a buffalo skin tepee, in what is now North Dakota, where the Knife River joins the Missouri. That was the day, April 7, the point of no return day, when Lewis and Clark had to send the large keel boat back down the river — to leave them alone in a wilderness no European American had ever seen before. The keel boat carried their supplies, ammunition and food, and was a secure redoubt from attack. But the boat could go no further. Now they were alone.

Let me read a little of what Lewis wrote that night:

> **"Our vessels consisted of six small canoes and two large row boats.**

This little fleet, altho not quite as rispectable (sic) a those of Columbus and Captain Cook, were still viewed by us as much pleasure as those deservedly famed adventurers ever suffered theirs."

And then Lewis became reflective, writing by a flickering candle in his tepee on the edge of the unknown —

"The picture which now presented itself to me was a most pleasing one, entertaining as I do, the most confident hope of succeeding in a voyage which had formed a darling project of mine for the past ten years. I could but esteem this moment of my departure as among the most happy of my life." [p.212]

Lewis should have been scared to death. He should have been in a dry bunk on that keel boat, headed back down river toward safety — or at least, at anchor — speculating about what was out there, using his imagination to make his report. I don't now about you, but I would have been scared to death. I am not sure that the word happy would have occurred to me.

But that's what he wrote — as he faced a dangerous, demanding and unknown future. And that's what courage is — getting up the next morning, glad to be alive, packing up your gear and moving ahead. And that is exactly what I think you and I and our whole nation need to

be about in this important and critical and frightening time.

There is actually a much older story about it. It's almost 3,000 years old and it's in the Bible. I almost hesitate to use this story because there are people dying in Palestine and Israel on the basis of the story's uses. And so I want to disassociate myself entirely from the using of this story to claim exclusive rights to that troubled land.

But there is still great truth in the story 3,000 years ago, a loose federation of nomadic people have been wandering around I the desert, from oasis to oasis for forty years. Now they are standing on a hill, looking over a river into what they now as the Promised Land. They're

seeing the future and it looks a little scary. Who knows who or what is in that land. Who knows if there is any food over there? Who knows what will happen to us when w cross that river and move into the unknown?

Moses, their leader, is getting old. He can't go much further. So he gathers them all together for some last minute advice and he says the kinds of things parents usually say when their kids are going off to Culver for the summer, or off to college — you know, do your laundry, change your underwear and socks, eat your vegetables, tuck your shirt in, stand up straight, clean your room.

And this — the climax —

“I call heaven and earth to witness — I have set before you life and death. Choose life so that you may live.”

That’s an important thought. Those people are now responsible for their lives. They have to make a choice — and that choice to live into an unknown future — requires change.

Maybe the best line anybody ever wrote is this one:

“To be or not to be: that is the question.”

That’s Shakespeare — in Hamlet. A modern psychologist put it this way:

“Acorns become oak trees and kittens become cats automatically.

A man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choice… that choice (those decisions) require courage." [*The Courage to Create*, p.4,5]

The truth is that sometimes it's hard to muster the courage to be. Sometimes the risks are so great and we're so afraid that we don't do anything, become paralyzed. Someone said that if Michelangelo had been afraid of heights, he would have painted the Sistine Floor.

Fear limits and paralyzes. Fear of failing prevents us from trying something new. Fear of failing sometimes keeps us from going out for the team, applying for the part in the play. Sometimes fear keeps us from saying the three most important

words any of us can say: "I love you." Fear of failing keeps us from reaching for the sky. I love the story of the little girl in Sunday school furiously drawing a picture, using all of her crayons. "What are you drawing?" her teacher asked. "Why, I'm drawing a picture of God!" the little girl answered without even looking up from her work. But honey, "no one knows what God looks like" the teacher said, to which the courageous little girl responded "they will when I'm finished."

Some people think that we're so frightened of the terrorists that we're a little paralyzed at the moment and it just may be that to frighten us and paralyze us is exactly what the terrorists wanted. We're pretty obsessed with our

security these days and the government keeps reminding us to be alert, watchful — to be afraid. And in the meantime we can't figure out how to see that every child in America has a good education and there are nine million children in America this morning — not you, and not my grandchildren — but nine million, some of whom live less than a mile from where I live and work — who have no health insurance an for whom health care is very, very difficult to receive. In our greatest cities, we've got enclaves of institutional poverty, three generations of unemployed men and adolescent mothers selling drugs to and shooting at one another. It is a denial of our being as human — our destiny as a free nation, to walk away from that.

Chicago Tribune **columnist Bob Greene wrote "Evidently, those who attacked us on September 11 do not want our land, our riches, our buildings. What they want is our terror. Fear itself is their goal." [12-17-01]**

And that is precisely the victory we must not give them.

It is a choice finally: a personal decision we each make every day of our lives. The occasion for coverage comes wrapped up in other choices: to love or not to love; to get involved or to hold back; to give your life to something that matters or to retreat and settle for a good credit rating and a secure retirement; to commit self passionately to some improbable and wonderful

dream like the peace of the world, the recognition of God's people, the healing and feeding and housing of God's children beginning with the children of your own community — or staying at arms length, the refusal to risk anything, being a spectator instead of a participant.

Perhaps you have visited the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington — an unrelenting three hours of pictures, exhibits, films, showing good, common folk, involved in the most grotesque evil by little choice, by not speaking out and standing up, by giving in to fear, by averting their eyes, by refusing to care. And at the end of the tour, "The Hall of Remembrance" a large room, quiet, with candles, a pool of water and inscribed

on the wall these very words from back on the edge of history spoken to a frightened people looking into the unknown, unexplained, un-chartered future.

> **“today I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”**

God gives each of us the gift of life without condition. It is ours to live, to enjoy, to use, to give.

Jesus said “those who save their lives will lose them. And those who lose their lives — give their lives away — will find them.”

It is a matter of courage … a choice we make every day. The Courage to Be.

God bless us all on our way.

Amen.